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AUTHOR Johnston, Malcolm
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ABSTRACT

Issues and patterns in second language learning are discussed, drawing on a 1985 study with learners of English as a second language in Australia. Discussion begins with an analysis of the process of learning one form of verb marking, the ending "-ing." The inherent complexity of this form in English is examined, and ways in which learners at beginning and more advanced levels and from different native language backgrounds approach this complex form are explored. The second chapter looks at a variety of principles and subprocesses in language learning: learning as elaboration of previously-known patterns; acquisition of English pronouns; acquisition of vocabulary; acquisition of the indefinite article; form-function constraints; lexical opposites; learning as decomposition of elements (as contrasted with elaboration); and learning as analysis. Chapter three addresses the teachability hypothesis, which makes claims about developmental stages in language learning and the learning of variation in language patterns. In chapter four, ways to apply theory in classroom research to improve language teaching practice are discussed. Contains 30 references. (MSE)

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Malcolm Johnston

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Australian Studies in Language Acquisition has been established within NLLIA/LARC at the University of Western Sydney Macarthur to provide opportunities for researchers in language acquisition in Australia to record the work they are currently engaged in.

Publications are envisaged as spanning a range from the completed monograph to the working paper on on-going research as well as reflections on the possible application of language acquisition understanding to language teaching.

Contributors are expected to come from a variety of areas connected with second or first language acquisition research including practitioners in language-related professions developing practices based on research or reflecting on the theory-practice connection.

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(E-mail address: G.Saunders@uws.EDU.AU)

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National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia
Language Acquisition Resource Centre
University of Western Sydney, Macarthur

PO Box 555 Campbelltown NSW 2560 AUSTRALIA
Phone: (02) 772 9292 Fax: (02) 792 2924

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Malcolm Johnston

NLLIA/LARC

University of Western Sydney, Macarthur

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Foreword

It is appropriate to set forth this series of Australian Studies in Language Acquisition with a monographic study on the relationship between language learning and language teaching by Malcolm Johnston, a founder of second language acquisition studies in Australia.

Johnston's long involvement in this field issues from an important social phenomenon which has shaped Australia's recent history, namely mass immigration of non-English speaking people from Eastern, Central and Southern Europe, followed by, increasingly, Middle Eastern, Latin American and Asian countries. These people needed to learn English to improve their life chances in Australia, and many of them received formal instruction in English, e.g. through the Adult Migrant Education Service.

Thus, among the early questions motivating Johnston's research in the mid seventies was how people from a variety of language backgrounds do learn a second language (English in this case); whether the nature of their language background made a difference to their learning; what connection, if any, there might be between the way in which learners learned a second language and the way in which that same language is taught. For instance, did textbooks used to teach English as a second language to the adult migrant learner reflect the progression achieved by the learner in a "natural" (rather than "educational") setting? Or indeed, what did that "natural" learner progression look like?

From the perspective of the nineties these questions might be asked differently. Partly because the answers to some of them have progressed a fair way and because the field, too, has changed considerably as further research refines understanding of the issues. Indeed Malcolm Johnston himself has made a significant contribution to finding some of these answers and refining understanding of the issues involved with his thoughtful, meticulous study of the evolving language system of Polish and Vietnamese background learners of English as a second language in the Australian context (see his SAMPLE Report, 1985a).

The question of the connection between theory and practice or, in other words, the implications of research into language learning for the language teaching profession needed to be drawn then, as now. And Johnston did not shy away from doing so in, for instance, chapters 5 and 6 of the SAMPLE report itself, a report which remains unparalleled among English interlanguage studies.

In the present monograph Johnston updates two of his articles which appeared in disparate publications in 1987, that is "The case of -ing for the beginning learner" published in Prospect: A Journal of Adult Migrant Education (3,1:91-102) and "Understanding Learner Language" published in Nunan, D. (ed) Applying Second Language Acquisition Research (NCRC/AMEP 5-44). Thus, the discussion on the theory/practice relationship is presented in a unified way as was originally intended. The author approaches the (apparent) tension between pure and applied studies by drawing parallels between the language teaching profession and other professions, such as engineering or medicine and their connection to

sciences such as, respectively, physics and biology. This after zooming in on a detailed example of the process of the acquisition of one particular form (-ing) and the subsequent assignment to it of categories and functions by learners.

Researchers such as Johnston, who have also experienced first hand the second language classroom, are in an optimal position to draw useful indications for the language teacher, even where they may be in the nature of cautionary remarks.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge here the precise editing assistance of Alison Lyssa.

Bruno Di Biase
NLLIA/LARC, University
of Western Sydney Macarthur

Chapter 1

Understanding Learner Language

> *Before I came here I was knowing all the English language tense(s)...present tense...past tense... present perfect tense...perfect tense...future tense...future in the past ...everything...I was knowing...I am knowing now...[]...I jus(t) asked...er...one day the boss...I..[]...said t(o) (h)im...[]..'How you knowing this tense?'...for example... 'go'...'How can you use this word?'...past tense?...present tense?...the other tense?...he jus(t) looked me like that...he told me...'I don't know, Cengiz'...this is Australian people ...I am Turkish people...I am knowing, he doesn('t) know... can you explain this?"*— Cengiz [GENGHIS] K.

Cengiz's question invites an easy answer: while their formal or explicit knowledge of the rules may be limited, native speakers like his Australian boss possess extensive tacit or subconscious grammatical knowledge — so complex, that no formal grammar has yet succeeded in capturing it. This is the pat explanation that linguists often give, but it sidesteps the seriousness of Cengiz's plea and ignores a hornet's nest of issues for the language teacher.

The purpose of this article is to explore these issues in the light of current findings from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Research.

I shall first provide an analysis of a phenomenon — namely verb marking — which touches on a number of

processes characteristic of language acquisition in general, such as category formation, and how such processes develop, and are propagated and refined. My observations will be supplemented with references to and examples of other important principles and processes in SLA. From there I will move on to the question of how an understanding of these principles can provide guidelines for the practising teacher.

Finally, I will tackle the more difficult problem of how specific findings from SLA can be implemented in ways which allow teaching and associated activities such as assessment and course design to become more focussed and efficient.

As will become apparent, this latter process of application is not as simple as it may seem, and requires certain preconditions that have generally not been given the consideration they deserve. However, it is most certainly feasible, and has been for some time. I would also like to anticipate from the outset any possible misconception that what I have to say about the process of application entails the resurrection of some kind of structural syllabus or method: this is very definitely not the case. This caveat aside, I will not touch on questions of method, since they hinge on considerations outside the scope of the present work.

1. Verb Marking

One of the ironies in Cengiz's speech is the way he incorrectly uses the present tense in attempting to display his knowledge of English verbs. We need to look at why this happens, and how significant an error it is.

1.1. The Case of *-ing*

All teachers are familiar with phrases like the following: *Last Sunday I going to market.* Such phrases, where the verb is marked with *-ing* are often taken as evidence that students are learning or have learnt to use the "present progressive (or continuous) tense". This is largely due to a pervasive belief that students learn teaching objectives in the exact way in which they are presented. And, since mastering the contrast between the "present progressive tense" and the so-called "simple present" is a common teaching objective in the first few lessons in many coursebooks (as well as a favourite of many teachers), utterances like the one cited are taken to be evidence that students are learning (albeit imperfectly) what they are being taught. Moreover, from the point of view of a native speaker of English, or even a proficient non-native speaker, starting with the present tense may seem the simplest and most logical approach. However, this assumption warrants some careful examination.

1.2. Points of View: The Teacher

Most teachers want to teach their students "correct" language, and in order to do this they need to be able to provide "accurate" descriptions of that language.

Here we come to our first problem, since the "simple present" is not strictly a present tense, much less a simple one. In fact, the only time the "simple present" is used in the way which its label indicates is in sporting commentaries or narratives such as:

> *Langer offloads the ball to Meninga, who cuts inside and scores between the uprights.*

To complicate matters further, when we wish to talk about the past in an emphatic, eye-witness manner, we use exactly the same form, and the example just given could equally form part of a description of a crucial part of a football match that had *already* taken place — in short, a past event.

Like most tenses in English, the "simple present" has a variety of functions. I should point out here that the term "tense" is being used in a workaday — rather than a linguistic — sense. In a linguistic description "tense" refers specifically to the time frame of the event denoted by the verb — its presentness, pastness or futurity; other temporal characteristics of the event — such as whether it is on-going or complete — fall under the rubric of terms like "aspect". As a workaday "tense", the main function of the "simple present" is to indicate actions performed habitually. In this capacity, the "simple present" is not really a tense at all, since it does not make reference to a time frame. When there is a temporal frame, the time reference is not necessarily present. Indeed one of the functions of the form is to indicate futurity:

Next month, I leave for New York.

Yet another function is to refer to events that may not even happen:

I hope it rains soon.

In languages like Italian and Spanish this latter function is one of modality: hence the subjunctive.

Because what I have been calling the "simple present" exhibits this complex pattern of usage, in which the strict notion of tense does not always figure, linguists describing English tend to avoid the term altogether. Many linguists would argue that the basic present tense in English is

actually what I have been calling the "present progressive".

Even here, the pattern of usage exhibited by native speakers is complicated. While the "present progressive" can be used to describe events happening at the very moment, for example:

John's washing the car out the back,

it is also used to refer to future events:

I'm playing tennis tomorrow morning,

and even habitual occurrences:

He's always complaining about something or other.

Moreover, there are certain restrictions on the verbs which can be used in the "present progressive". For example, in standard English one cannot say:

**I am believing you* ,

or, as in the example from Cengiz:

**I was knowing all the English language tense(s).*

These restrictions are quite systematic: in essence, all verbs denoting an action ("actives" in linguistic parlance) can take the continuous aspect (that is, they can occur in "progressive" constructions), while most verbs denoting a state (called "statives") cannot. This accounts for why the asterisked examples are ungrammatical in most dialects of English.

Even here, however, the situation is not black and white. For instance, "*want*" is a stative verb, and while one does not normally announce:

**I'm wanting an ice cream,*

it is possible to say things like:

Bobby's always wanting things he can't have.

Similarly, while it is definitely not grammatical to say:

**I'm understanding Fred,*

we can say things like:

I'm understanding more and more as I go along.

Individual judgements about the grammaticality of sentences like those just given may vary, but it has been found that this too is a systematic phenomenon — a matter of where each person's "threshold of grammaticality" (and the grey areas on either side of it) is located in relation to a hierarchically ordered list of stative verbs. That is, regardless of individual differences, some stative verbs are more likely to take the progressive aspect than others.

Given this complexity, teachers who wish to provide their students with an idea of "correct" usage for the "present" tenses of English have their job cut out for them. It might be argued that beginning students can just be given "the basics": presented with a simplified picture describing the "simple present" in terms of habitual actions, and the "present progressive" in terms of currently occurring events. Even if learners mastered this distinction, however, they would be left with the problem of the difference between actives and statives, and would be

likely to produce erroneous utterances of the **I am knowing French* kind.

More distinctions would have to be introduced, all at the cost of the initial goal of keeping things simple. Students who were given a simplified picture of the present tense would keep coming up against counter-evidence like the native speaker sentences given above, and would be likely to feel very confused, not knowing whether to believe their teacher or their ears.

A teaching objective which involves simplification has to be based on a firm understanding of what really is simple and basic, and we have seen that the traditional idea of what constitutes the basic present tense is not accepted by those people whose job it is to describe language, namely, linguists themselves.

This leaves the teacher in a rather difficult position: how is "simplicity" to be defined? We have seen that taking the traditional view leads to unwanted complexities, so there doesn't appear to be a strong case for sticking with it and resisting the ideas of modern linguistics. It is worth remembering that the traditionalist view is only a collection of ideas put forward by linguists of the past, and traditional ideas about tense (which were derived from Latin and imposed on English) have been found wanting — they are Model T Fords amongst Volvos and BMWs.

If we cannot argue for the traditional approach to teaching tenses on linguistic grounds, perhaps we can resort to its success in the classroom. Unfortunately, the case for the efficacy of the traditional approach is very weak: in fact, it can be shown that it really doesn't work[1]. How then, can we find a simple way into this complex system? Is it possible at all?

1.2.1. A Pause for Reflection

The goal of teaching is not to make life easy for the teacher but to make language learnable for the student — an orientation which is coming to permeate modern language teaching. (Cf. Brindley, 1984). If traditional and modern pedagogy and linguistics cannot help us to define what is basic to the learning of tenses — in short, what is simple and necessary — let's see if learners themselves can offer some idea of how the problem can be handled.

Of course, if we simply ask learners how they want to go about their task, they are likely to give an answer — within the limits of their knowledge — rather similar to that of the traditionally minded teacher. The conscious knowledge that students have about the learning process will have come from their own experiences and from what previous teachers have taught them. We need to ignore for the moment what learners might think they are doing or what they want to do, and observe what learners actually do.

1.3. Points of View: The Beginning Learner

From learners' attempts it may appear that they are mastering the "present progressive" form. The evidence, however, shows this is not what is happening.

From the formal point of view, the auxiliary which characterises well formed present progressives is generally not present in the structures produced by learners. That is, they say *I going*, or *in Poland I working in factory*, rather than *I am going* or *I was working*. And where the auxiliary seems to be present, as, for instance, when a learner says *I'm going*, appearances can be deceptive, since we will very often find that further

inspection of the informant's speech shows that units like *I'm* are single chunks and are used as pronouns, rather than pronouns plus contracted auxiliaries.

How do we know that such units are single chunks? Normally, there are two tell-tale signs. One is that the learners in question produce utterances like *I'm go* or *I'm an(d) my wife*. The second is that these learners sometimes fail to produce a single example of the appropriate uncontracted form of the verb *to be*. Thus, a learner who regularly produces *I'm* and *he's* never says *I am* or *he is*. Some learners produce very few examples of the verb *to be* in any form whatsoever, much less as an auxiliary. Evidence like this means that despite appearances, the learner has not actually acquired the exact form of the present progressive.

If this is the case, and given that *-ing* marking occurs in English in other environments besides the present continuous, such as the past and future continuous, after verbs following *see* and *remember* (in sentences like *I don't remember doing that*), and also as a gerund, why should we make the assumption that it is the present progressive that the learner has acquired? The answer will be, "Because it is the present progressive, and not those other forms which get taught in beginners' classes".

But at this point there is another problem. This is that non-standard *-ing* marking is produced by learners who have never been to class, and also by other types of learner, such as child first and second language learners. The argument that such forms are induced by teaching or input cannot be extended to include all of these learners, and is therefore beginning to look more than a bit suspect.

So far, I have only discussed form, and haven't actually paid any attention to the apparent meaning or function that the learner's use of *-ing* has. When we do look for

patterns of meaning, we find that for beginning learners there is simply no indication that the *-ing* marking has any regular connection with the semantic notion of continuous action. Furthermore, for some learners there is no pattern of regularity in their use of *-ing* to support any kind of reference to time at all. In these cases *-ing* marks neither tense nor aspect.

This is a real obstacle for the argument that *-ing* marking in beginning learners is connected with the present progressive. Of course, it would always be possible here to say, "Well, the learners just didn't understand their lessons very well, and they used the form incorrectly". Once again, this would be to judge learners in terms of our own understanding of English grammar. We have seen that this line of approach is fraught with difficulty; the best we can hope from it here is that it will show learners to be incompetent and bumbling. This is not a particularly constructive way of trying to understand their behaviour.

Moreover, it is not only the learner who suffers from being judged in this way. Teachers fare no better, since they can be said to have failed to achieve their teaching objectives. Given that we're attempting to find out what learners are doing, let's give them the benefit of the doubt, and assume that in putting *-ing* on the end of words that they are trying to do something, though not necessarily anything that we might expect them to be doing from our viewpoint as competent speakers of English.

The following paragraphs will show that this learner centred mode of observing doesn't have to be justified on charitable grounds: it actually turns out to be very fruitful.

1.3.1. Some Results from the *SAMPLE* Study

The examples and analysis that follow come from an extensive study of naturalistic, mixed and formal learners from two very distinct language backgrounds — Vietnamese and Polish. This study (Johnston, 1985a) is entitled *Syntactic and Morphological Progressions in Learner English* (*SAMPLE* for short), and consists of analyses of approximately one and a half hours of recorded conversational data with each of twelve informants from the two language backgrounds (over 700 pages of transcript). The informants were selected on the basis of oral proficiency ratings (from 0.5 to 4.0 on the AMES scale, or 0+ to 2 on the ASLPR)[2], and it was subsequently found that they ranged over five of the six developmental stages for English (as identified by Manfred Pienemann and the author). For more details about the *SAMPLE* study, interested readers are referred to Johnston (1985a, 1985b). One of the objects of close analysis in the *SAMPLE* study was the pattern of *-ing* usage by both beginning and more advanced learners, and also by learners who actually appeared to produce "correct" progressive forms.

For the beginning learners I found that in the first instance the only regular thing about *-ing* marking is that it is attached to words which appear to be verbs. I say "appear to be verbs" since the words in question need not be described in terms of grammatical categories at this early point, but simply as words referring to actions. This marking of "action words" occurs not too long after the stage at which speakers just produce single words or disconnected strings of single words whose grammatical status is not clear. An example of this early stage is the elliptic statement *no work*, in answer to a question like *Do you work?*: in such a case it is not clear whether *work* is a noun, a verb, or something which is neither.

Unambiguous marking of action words with *-ing* is therefore an important step in permitting the learner to get past the "disjointed" stage described above, since larger units of speech, e.g. sentences are characterised principally (in both traditional and modern grammars) by the presence of a verb, and what the learner appears to be doing is recreating the grammatical category of verb in the target language by setting up a *prototype* for this category — the prototype of action words. In English, using *-ing* to mark off this prototype is in fact a very productive step, since it is largely action words ("actives") which take this marking in native speech itself.

This brings us to the question of why the learner chooses *-ing*, and not some other verbal marker, to set up the prototype.

One line of argument might be that in choosing *-ing* the learner is reacting directly to "input", and copying what he or she hears.

While this rather passive interpretation of learner behaviour cannot be ruled out entirely, it encounters the following difficulty. In languages which do not enforce the active/stative distinction in the same way as English, it is still the case that both child and adult learners choose to begin the process of systematic marking by marking action words. In German, for example, adult learners use the past markers *ge-* and *-t* or the infinitive marker *-en* for this purpose, although these markers are neutral as regards the active/stative distinction.

I believe it can be justifiably claimed, then, that in choosing *-ing* learners are behaving in a less passive way than merely "copying input": the association between the *-ing* marker and action in English may be just a happy coincidence. But there is further evidence from German to back up the more constructive interpretation of learner

behaviour. While adult learners of German choose to mark active — and usually transitive — verbs, children take an opposing course and first begin to mark intransitive verbs, which are also frequently stative. (Clahsen, H. 1984). This may seem paradoxical, but the point is that while the children take a different course to their adult counterparts, they are nevertheless making the same distinction, namely: separating actions and states. This is the really important point. Children learning English as their L1, incidentally, follow the same pattern as adults, unlike German children.

For the learner the vital first step, it seems, is to establish a prototype grammatical category on the basis of meaning: how this is done is of secondary importance. English, with its distinction between actions and states, makes the choice of marker fairly straightforward; German does not.

Not all learners of English do choose *-ing* as their first marker for the prototype grammatical category of verb: some Polish speakers use the past *-ed* marker instead, in much the same way as adults learning German. The fact that some Polish speakers choose *-ed* rather than *-ing* can be explained on phonetic grounds, since Polish speakers can perceive and produce consonant clusters that result from the suffixation of the past *-ed* marker —/*kt*/ as in *worked*, for instance. Not all Polish speakers behave in this way, and those who do may well not use just the one marker: *-ing* and *-ed* might be freely intermixed, or, more probably, one marker will be used consistently with one set of verbs and the other marker with another set.

Interestingly, some linguists who specialise in the study of universal grammar argue very strongly that all languages respect the active/stative distinction in some way, which is another way of saying that it is a fundamental feature of language. So when one comes across independent evidence that learners are behaving with sensitivity to a

basic feature of this kind, a researcher can take comfort that the line of investigation which uncovered the evidence is a promising one.

Apart from its association with action, there may be another reason for most learners of English choosing *-ing* to create a prototype for verbs. This is that of the various morphological markers available in English, *-ing* is the one that is most easily identified, since it is syllabic and phonetically simple. This argument is reinforced by the behaviour of those Polish learners who do not choose *-ing*, but rather *-ed*, given that they are used to decoding and manipulating difficult clusters of consonants and can perceive the past marker right from the outset, whereas speakers of most other languages cannot.

1.3.2. The Case of *-ing*: Preliminary Conclusions

There are several points to take away from the preceding discussion. The first of these is that learners do behave systematically, and it is therefore important to try and understand what they are doing in their own terms.

The second point is that learners are sensitive to distinctions which we, as competent speakers of our language, can afford to ignore. Thus, for us, the *-ing* ending on verbs is — among other things — an indication of progressivity or continuity, while for the beginning learner it is an indication of action, and through this semantic notion a means of establishing a grammatical category. In other words, the learner's idea of what is basic is quite different from our own: we know all the main verbs of English, but for the learner it is essential to build up a prototypical notion of this category in the L2, regardless of whether or not the concept has already been mastered — that is, regardless of whether what is being learnt is a first language or a second one. The fact that

first and second language learners behave similarly (and they do so in many other ways apart from the behaviour we have been focussing on) is itself an important point and will have a bearing on later parts of our discussion.

A third point is that learners go about their task in an active, constructive way, rather than just making rather half-hearted attempts to copy the native speaker.

Finally, the preceding points imply that teaching which is not directed at the distinctions to which the beginning learner is sensitive will probably be much less effective than it might appear to be. Another implication is that it is quite possible for a learner and a teacher to be working at cross purposes without either party being aware of it: while the teacher is attempting to drum one concept into the learner's head — as in the case of the "present progressive" — the learner is utilising the teaching material in quite a different way.

1.3.3. The Case of *-ing*: A Summary to Date

So far, the discussion of *-ing* marking has been restricted to beginning learners. These learners do not produce formally correct structures, in that they omit the auxiliary. That is, they produce structures like *I going*; where apparently formally correct structures are produced — such as *I'm working* — supplementary evidence reveals that they should be parsed into two-constituent structures in exactly the same way as their non-standard counterparts, since the contracted auxiliary is bound to the normal pronoun form and is therefore not genuine.

For beginning learners we can say that the first function of the *-ing* marker is to enable the learner to build up a prototype grammatical category. This is achieved by

attaching the marker to words denoting basic actions like *come, go, work* and *do*. We have already commented on the importance of developing the category of "verb", since without verbs there cannot be sentences, and without sentences the learner's ability to communicate is very restricted.

When learners mark words as belonging to one grammatical category they virtually create a second category by default — that is, by marking some words as verbs they automatically create another possible category, namely, the category of "non-verb". In all probability, this second category acquires a specific label more or less contemporaneously with the creation of the "verb" category, or at the very least, quite soon afterwards. This second category is, not surprisingly, based on the notion of "thing", and is, in grammatical terms, the category of "noun". Like the verbal category it has its own distinctive marker — usually the definite article. Prototypical members of the noun category are concrete objects or objects represented by proper names.

1.4. Points of View: More Advanced Learners

We have seen how use of the *-ing* marker allows beginning learners to build up a prototype grammatical category, and on the basis of this category other prototypical categories. In this way learners begin to develop a "syntax" — a means of constructing full sentences — which permits them to produce more complex and communicatively effective language. What happens after this?

At first, the learner does not discriminate between the different kinds of sentence in which *-ing* marking is applied. This is not surprising, in view of the fact that the learner is trying to compile a list of English verbs[3] and

only has, in any case, the capacity to generate a fairly small number of sentences or utterances.

As time goes on, however, the learner begins to restrict *-ing* marking to certain contexts. In the *SAMPLE* Report, I catalogued the different types of utterances in which non-standard *-ing* was produced and came to the following conclusions.

Semantically — meaning-wise — the predominant context for *-ing* was the past tense context. So, from being a general action or verb marker, *-ing* begins to function in a more restricted fashion as a possible past marker. I was interested to hear from Genny Louie that, in a recent survey to do with student understanding of teacher explanations, a number of students actually reported that they understood the *-ing* marker to be a past marker — this shows that the behaviour I have been talking about need not be entirely unconscious.[4]

Note here that while the learner has altered his pattern of usage of *-ing*, it is still very different from the pattern of the "present progressive" which he is meant to be following. This is another example of the final point made in Section 1.3.2.

So far we have looked at developments in the use of *-ing* from the point of view of meaning. When I listed syntactic environments in the *SAMPLE* data, I found that favourable contexts for the production of *-ing* were contexts like subordinate and co-ordinate clause, and verbal complement (a verbal complement is where one verb stands as the object of another, as in sentences like *I want working* or *I can doing any job*).

The reader might feel like stopping to ask: "How can you call this crazy pattern 'development'?" Certainly, the use of *-ing* in this way seems rather illogical. At least for

beginning learners it was possible to argue that they were responding, albeit rather oddly, to input from standard English.

You will remember, however, that I argued against this "input" explanation and plumped for a more active and constructive interpretation of the learner's behaviour. This new and superficially peculiar step that the learners I studied seem to have taken actually provides support for my proposal that learners are not mere copy-cats.

1.4.1. An Explanation for New Uses of *-ing*

Crazy as this new behaviour might seem, there may be a simple explanation for the appearance of *-ing* in all of these different contexts.

This is that the contexts are "marked" — or unusual — contexts for the learner to be operating in, and for this reason, the greater the amount of information that can be provided about the structure of an utterance the more chance there is that it can be decoded by listeners, and incorporated into the learner's own developing grammar. As we have already seen, supplying information about the location of the verb is one of the most effective single things that a learner can do to clarify structure, and this is as true of complex sentences as it is of the simple sentences produced by less advanced learners. As regards the use of *-ing* as a past marker: this appears to indicate that learners are aware that they should mark the verb some time before they know which marker is actually the appropriate one to use.

In summary, then, the use of *-ing* in past contexts and subordinate clauses, etc., is really an extension of the original use of *-ing* as a verb marker, and is a way of

making utterances understandable and providing learners themselves with reference points for the development of more complex structures.

1.5. Points of View: Very Advanced Learners

The next step in tracing the development of the use of *-ing* is to look at more advanced learners still. These learners actually use formally correct "progressive" structures, so we might think at last we have identified a few students who are really doing what they are supposed to. However, once again, the picture is less simple than it first looks.

In the *SAMPLE* data, only a small number of learners actually produced non-formulaic tokens of apparently correct progressive structures. While the number of learners who produced such structures was small, the number of examples, or "tokens", of the structures themselves was relatively large. The interesting thing to note with these tokens is that the majority of them were *past progressives* rather than present progressives. The one speaker who does not follow this pattern is a Vietnamese learner who appears to have completely mastered the structure; the speakers we will discuss below were from the Polish part of the sample.

Since in English the past progressive and the simple past are sometimes interchangeable (for instance, one can say, decontextually, *In Poland I worked as a mechanical engineer*, or *In Poland I was working as a mechanical engineer*) it is not always possible to say that a particular token is inappropriate. Nevertheless, in the case of the three informants who in the first round of the *SAMPLE* interviews produced progressive structures without having totally mastered them, the results are as follows. The least orally proficient speaker produced eight

incorrectly used tokens, one optionally correct token of the kind given above, and only one correct token. The next most orally proficient speaker produced one incorrect token, one optionally appropriate one, and one appropriate token. The most orally proficient speaker produced one incorrect token, and nine optionally appropriate ones.

What is notable here is that, with one apparent exception which we will look at shortly, none of the verbs which occur in the inappropriate or optionally appropriate tokens are used by the these informants in the simple past form. Thus, the first learner mentioned above uses *go*, *mind* (in the sense of *think*), *write*, *study* and *concentrate* in progressive structures but not in simple pasts. One verb, *work*, occurs in both forms, but, as we shall see, this is not a true duplication. Similarly, the second informant uses *do*, *study* and *walk* only in the progressive form. Likewise, the third (most orally proficient) learner uses *work* seven times in optionally appropriate tokens and *think* once, but neither of these verbs are produced as simple pasts. Of course, all the verbs mentioned are marked with *-ing*, as required by the progressive aspect.

What could be the reason for this peculiar distribution? The one apparent exception that we have mentioned, namely, the verb *work* used by the first informant, provides a clue to the explanation. Consider the following narrative:

> *then I was...er...I worket...er...in the little private firm...[]...when [where] I worket...was working by [as] ...eh...painter*
>
> *aj.1: [197-199]*

Since there is no semantic reason for the adjustment, i.e. *worked* would be quite acceptable in the context, what seems to be happening is that the informant is replacing the phonetically non-standard form *worket* by the

phonetically standard form *was working*. We said above that *work* was an apparent exception. This is not strictly true, however, if, as the learner does himself in this example, we take into consideration the phonetic dimension.

In short, the progressive form is being used as way of avoiding the production of non-standard past forms, or in cases where the informant is perhaps not sure of the pronunciation of the past form of the verb in question, or whether it is regular or irregular. The same informant who produced the narrative above produces another very neat piece of evidence for this conjecture in the dialogue below:

I *...when this man...[]...had a work...[]...he...er ..taught me about it...and...[]...I goed...*

INT *Oh, ho!*

I *Scuse me...this time [tense] is not good...I was going...*

aj.1: [210-17]

Here, the interviewer lets the informant know that he has used the wrong past form, and the informant resorts to the progressive form in an attempt to try to repair his error. Not surprisingly, this particular learner does not produce *went* in either of the two interviews he participated in.

1.5.1. Advanced Learners - A Summary

The examples given above show quite convincingly that even well formed progressive structures can be the result of an avoidance strategy: they are used when the learners in question are unsure of the correct past form. This gives us our explanation for why the progressive form, when it

does appear, appears mainly in past tense contexts: in present tense contexts a speaker does not need to choose a special form of the verb and therefore has nothing to be unsure of, and thus nothing to avoid.

It should be said at this point that while fully formed progressives may enter a learner's grammar as the result of an avoidance strategy this does not imply that the learner is not really making progress. If one looks back at the three informants we have described in this section, one can discern a progression in terms of function. That is, the least proficient speaker produced the overwhelming majority of his progressive structures in semantically inappropriate contexts (the ratio was eight errors, one possible, and one correct).

The other two informants, however, exhibit much better strike rates, and at least manage not to produce their progressive structures in contexts where they are not clearly inappropriate. Rather, they restrict the production of these structures to contexts where they are at least permissible, if not absolutely necessary. This process of restriction is one of the typical processes of language learning, and we have already seen another instance of it in Section 1.4.1, where non-standard *-ing* marking ceases to be used to mark prospective verbs right across the board and is used to mark them only in complex structures.

1.6. Some Pertinent Observations

1.6.1. Form and Function

A very important point emerging from our discussion has to do with the relationship of form and function. From our examination of the emergence of well formed progressives, it is clear that the structure — the form — is acquired long before the correct function. This is a very common state of affairs in language acquisition and is one of the reasons why a proper theory of language learning needs to be able to account for the development and emergence of forms as separate entities. Forms very often serve as pegs on which to hang functions, and even if one is primarily interested in how a learner expresses and develops functions it is necessary to understand the developing chronology of forms.

1.6.2. Constructive Errors

A further point to note is that it is very probable that non-standard *-ing* marking itself acts as a base on which learners can build standard progressive forms. This is very clear in the case of the least proficient of the three learners discussed in this section. Although he uses standard progressive forms quite a large number of times, this learner still persists in the practice of marking verbs in past contexts with non-standard *-ing*. The three verbs which are treated in this way are *work*, *study* and *write*, and all three of them also appear in past progressive structures. This suggests that the form of the progressive is derived from the earlier strategy of *-ing* marking, and is yet another piece of evidence for the productiveness of this learner strategy.

The evolution of standard forms out of non-standard ones illustrates another extremely important feature of

language acquisition. Errors do not necessarily persist. This contradicts a very commonly held belief among language teachers that if learners' "mistakes" are not ruthlessly eradicated they will become ingrained. Most people who subscribe to this view of "bad habits" do not realise that it is the product of a specific, and discredited, theory of learning: behaviourism. Behaviourist theories of learning rely heavily on the concepts of stimulus and response and habit formation through repetition. While there may be some aspects of learning in which these processes play a part, it has been quite conclusively established that they cannot provide a satisfactory account of how even comparatively simple tasks are mastered, much less the massively complex achievements of language acquisition. In fact, the problem of language learning was one of the major factors leading to the demise of behaviourism. (Chomsky, 1959). One only needs to reflect on the way the error riddled speech of young children develops into the smooth competence of the native speaker to appreciate the inadequacies of behaviourist theories of learning.

Despite this, and despite the fact that twenty years of research into language acquisition have established remarkably few qualitative differences between child and adult language learning, behaviourist ideas of habit formation still dominate popular ideas about language learning — so-called "folk linguistics".

A good many precepts of folk linguistics can simply be refuted by dispassionately listening to what happens every day in language classrooms: they only survive because what one believes has a very powerful effect on what one perceives. It is a worthwhile exercise to remind oneself of the power of ideas to act as filters: the most obvious questions are frequently the hardest ones to ask. This is as true of researchers as anyone else, and anyone whose job

consists of formulating questions knows how dismayingly often one fails to see the wood for the trees.

1.7. Where to From Here?

In the preceding sections I have examined merely one aspect of the process of language learning, and have extracted some general principles about how learners go about their task. There are a myriad of examples we could have chosen, and there is now a quite extensive literature on second language acquisition alone. I have authored and co-authored a number of papers on the subject, as well as a book — the *SAMPLE* Report. Readers who are interested in second language acquisition or language acquisition in general should refer to the attached bibliography, where a selection of stimulating and readable monographs and books is listed. In particular, readers interested in research into second language acquisition in Australia are referred to all of the *LARC Occasional Papers*, and to forthcoming papers in the *Australian Studies in Second Language Acquisition* series. Also highly recommended are the numerous pioneering studies by Manfred Pienemann, to whom my own debt will be obvious.

There is simply insufficient space here for describing the acquisitional process in a way which would do justice to it, and I will therefore not even attempt this daunting task. Rather than run the risk of being misinterpreted by giving a potted summary of what is now a fully fledged and rapidly expanding branch of linguistics, I will restrict myself to two objectives.

The first will involve enumerating some of the more important findings about the processes of second language acquisition: the reader can then examine, by means of the references given, the findings which led to the discovery of these processes.

The second objective will be to look at an issue inevitably raised by this discussion and by any other work the reader cares to consult. This is, of course, the issue of practical implications.

Notes to Chapter 1

1 See Johnston, 1985a, Chapter 5 for an examination of the grading sequences in two typical ESL coursebooks in the light of what we know about the learner's own natural grading principles. See also the "teachability" experiments reported on below.

2 The ASLPR (Australian Second language Proficiency Ratings) and the AMES (Adult Migrant Education Service) are both oral proficiency scales, with the former going from 0 to 5, and the latter from 0.0 to 7.0. In both cases, the upper level is meant to represent "native speaker proficiency", so the learners who contributed to the SAMPLE data ranged from near-beginners to what one might call "advanced intermediate" students. Johnston, 1985b, contains a description of the first five developmental stages for English, and Pienemann, Johnston & Brindley, 1988, contains more information on development in English, as well as a report on the assessment procedure referred to later in this paper. (It should be said that this procedure has now been very considerably improved, as well as automated for computer use).

3 Pienemann and Johnston, 1984, 1985, deal with this process in some detail. See also Bresnan (ed) 1982 for a detailed description of a lexically based grammar and argumentation for the superiority of such a grammar as a psychologically plausible grammar over a Chomsky type transformational grammar: the Introduction outlines these issues very clearly.

4 Louie, (personal communication), National AMEP conference, Melbourne, June, 1984.

Chapter 2

Principles and Processes: Learning as Analysis

Two of the observations we have made about the acquisitional process so far are that it is a constructive activity determined by distinctions which are of importance to learners though not necessarily to native speakers, and that it can involve the imposition of gradual restrictions on the usage of a previously learnt structure.

I have provided one example above of how learning can proceed by a process of restriction, and we have seen how, in the case of verb tenses, distinctions made by learners allow them to gradually converge on target-like language use. We're going to look in more detail at this process of restriction since its implications for understanding how languages are learnt — and hence teaching them effectively — are profound.

Gradual restriction is actually one instance of a very important and powerful principle of language learning, namely: learning as analysis. The process of learning by analysis is discussed in considerable detail in the *SAMPLE* Report, and also in other work by the author. We will look briefly here at the two main forms this kind of learning takes and provide some examples of the different domains of learner language in which it operates.

Learning as analysis can be sub-classified under two different headings: learning as elaboration and learning as decomposition. While distinct, the two processes are not mutually exclusive. Learning as elaboration is characterised by the emergence of increasingly detailed structures and learning as decomposition by the development of appropriately fine-grained distinctions. Both processes are necessary ones in the development of a complex language system and can be said to interact in the formation of such a system.

2.1. Learning as Elaboration

What is termed in the *SAMPLE* Report as "elaboration by discrimination" (Johnston, 1985a) is a good example of the first type of learning. The acquisition of a personal pronominal (pronoun) system is a good example of this.

2.1.1. Acquisition of English Pronouns

Pronominal systems in English, as in all languages, are characterised by a series of distinctions. In English, for example, we have distinctions of person — first, second, and third; distinctions of number — singular or plural (some languages have further distinctions of this kind); distinctions of gender — masculine and feminine (once again, some languages have a neuter gender or some entirely different system of classification, founded, for example, on the *shape* or *tangibility* of objects); and distinctions of case — nominative and accusative in English (these plus numerous extra cases in other languages).

The English pronominal system is not particularly rich in distinctions in comparison with those of many other

languages. Thus, we do not have a distinction between dual and trial, inclusive or exclusive, polite and familiar, or animate and inanimate. In addition, not all of the distinctions mentioned for English apply to all pronouns — *you*, for example is invariant for number, gender and case. Nevertheless, the system is complicated enough to serve the purposes of native speakers and to make life difficult for learners of the language.

The point about these distinctions in the context of the present discussion is that they are not acquired simultaneously by learners, even if, as is the case with many adult learners, the concepts behind them have already been mastered. Consider the following snippet of conversation from a relatively proficient Polish learner with over a year's residence in Australia, and ongoing social and professional contact with speakers of English.

> *mother-in-law...it's in Canada...yeah...'he?'...'she?' ...boy!...[]...she's a pension(er)...yeah...and she is...I don't know why I make that mistake...'he?' or 'she?'*
>
> *bb.5: [1333-4;1354-5]*

This learner is still uncertain about which third person pronoun to use, despite the fact that Polish has a gender distinction of the same kind for third person singular pronouns.

Such mistakes (and the speaker is university educated) are reflections of the dynamics underlying the acquisition of pronouns. We have already mentioned that the distinctions of a pronominal system are not acquired simultaneously. Studies of the acquisition of pronouns in a variety of languages show that the basic feature set for pronouns is that of person. (Felix & Simmet 1981). Thus, the first step that child and adult learners take in the learning of pronouns is to make an initial distinction

between *self* and *not self*, or, to put this another way, between *me* and *not me*. The concept of self is almost always represented by a first person pronoun — in English, *I* or *me*.

The second category is generally, but not invariably[1], represented by a second person pronoun — in English there is only one choice, *you*. This very typical process involves the setting up of optimal — that is, binary — distinctions. From the point of view of meaning this division is the clearest possible. However, as is obvious, it does not correspond very well with the conditions of the real world. In consequence, but still within the framework of person, learners soon introduce a third distinction by breaking up the not self category into the conversational distinction of present and not present.

This results in the creation of a third person category. While this process can be and has been documented (Felix & Simmet, 1981), it can also be glimpsed — rather in the fashion of a "flashback" — in the form of occasional errors made by learners who have basically mastered the distinction. Thus, slips such as the following are quite common in learner speech:

> *one is...eh...Louis...er...hyou...er...he come from Malta.*
>
> *is.1: [145-6]*

> *wits me in Australia is my brother wis your... his... er... his... his wife.*
>
> *jb.1: [298-9]*

Once the basic person framework for English is established by learners, their task becomes one of filling in this framework by introducing distinctions of number and case. While it is not clear for English which of these two latter categories has top priority, what is clear is that the new distinctions which emerge follow the original pattern

of the evolution of the distinctions for person.[2] In other words, case and number distinctions appear first within the first person category. In English, as we have already mentioned, no further distinctions, apart from the introduction of the possessive form, need to be made for *you*, the second person pronoun. However, there are a variety of distinctions to be introduced for the category of third person, and it is clear, as in the examples given above, that considerable time is required for these to be established.

We are now in a position to ask what the significance of this process is. Basically, the import of this gradual adumbration of semantic features is that learners do not acquire pronouns as if they were arranged in a single ensemble or list, since some features are preconditions for others, and must precede them in acquisition. It might be convenient to think of it as the growth of a tree: twigs cannot grow before branches. Moreover, the complexity of a pronominal system reflects the complexity of a learner's discourse system, and the growth of the discourse system itself is reliant on many and varied factors. These considerations account for the slowness with which even the relatively simple pronoun system of English is learnt, and the frequency with which learners "backslide", as in the examples given above.

Unfortunately, this state of affairs is not often taken into account by teachers or textbooks, and learners tend to be presented with whole sets of pronouns in a single lesson. The result is, very predictably, confusion and frustration[3]. To a native speaker, a pronominal set may appear to be nothing more than a list of some dozen odd words, and learning it would therefore appear to be a task on the same level of complexity as learning the numbers up to twenty or the names of the letters of the alphabet. Clearly, however, this is not how the job presents itself to the learner.

There are a great many learning tasks which resemble the acquisition of pronouns, in which a network of distinctions or several interdependent networks are gradually elaborated in a mutually dependent fashion. The term "open ended" is applied to this kind of elaboration because it could, in principle, continue *ad infinitum*.

2.1.2. Acquisition of Lexis

The same principle of elaboration applies, for instance, to the acquisition of lexical (non-grammatical) words. Thus, a learner may begin by using a single word to represent a variety of objects — for instance, *car* may serve as an all-purpose word for *bus*, *truck*, and so forth. Additional vocabulary for talking about vehicles will then be gradually acquired as the learner sets up a series of distinctions — based perhaps on size or purpose — between different types of conveyance.

While it might seem here that the learner has a better chance of learning the various words for *vehicle* in the form of a list, we still need to remember that many of these words may be specific to a particular culture and way of life, and that learners are only likely to retain such a list of words if they have, once again, learnt the distinctions bestowed upon them by the new culture. This, too, takes time: imagine trying to memorise all the now superseded words for horse-drawn carriages which existed in the nineteenth century!

2.1.3. Acquisition of the Indefinite Article

Another, completely unrelated, example of the acquisition of an item which is dependent on the growth of a network of distinctions involves the learning of the English indefinite article. In this case it has been shown (and shown, incidentally, for learners in purely natural, purely formal, and mixed settings) that *a/an* first occurs in isolated units, such as *a little*, then in such isolated units embedded in more complex structures, such as *ate a little cake*, then in direct object contexts, like *read a book*, and finally in structures where they are objects of prepositions, such as *in a minute* (Pica, 1982). (Within this hierarchy of environments, there appear to be further distinctions of importance to the learner. Thus, certain verbs — namely, *have*, *get*, and *be* — seem to favour the production of the indefinite article in direct object or complement contexts). Once again, this progression requires considerable independent development of the learner's grammar — development that is certainly not taken into account in the standard methods of teaching this item.

One of the usual first steps in teaching the indefinite article is, in fact, trying to get learners to make the distinction between *a* and *an*. In the 700-odd pages of transcript on which the *SAMPLE* study is based, *an* is produced only seven times. This indicates the untenability of this apparently logical teaching objective as well.

2.2. Form-Function Constraints

One early feature of learning as analysis is, as we have seen, the setting up of optimal distinctions as a basis for subsequent elaboration. This process of optimisation sometimes manifests itself in what I will call "form-

function" constraints. What happens here is that certain structures, items or categorial possibilities are blocked off because others are set up in the initial stages of learning, and forms which should pose no special problem to the learner become unlearnable — at least for some time. This process appears to be a case of what is now referred to in grammatical theory as "morphological blocking". (Aronoff, 1976).
Form-function constraints originate in the learner's early tendency to associate a single optimally distinct form or structure with a single function — "one form, one function". The constraints explain a number of apparently unrelated facts of early and even later learner language.

2.2.1. Examples of Form-Function Constraints

One such fact is the well-documented tendency of beginning learners to acquire verbs with irregular past forms before apparently simpler regular pasts.

There are, however, a plethora of similar phenomena which are not so well recognised. Thus, the learners in the *SAMPLE* study almost never duplicated contracted verb forms with their uncontracted counterparts: for all the hundreds of examples of *can't* in the 700 pages of transcript representing the cross-sectional part of the data base, there is only a single example of *cannot*.

The situation is essentially the same for all other such contracted forms with the exception of *isn't*, where the alternative form *is not* emerges before other contractions, as a result of the early formation of negative sentences by the simple preposing of the verb *to be* before negated phrases, such as *is...no good*. Thus, with *isn't* the situation is the reverse for all other contracted forms, which cannot

be acquired in this way. The important point here is not that contracted forms do or do not emerge before their uncontracted counterparts, but that there is no duplication — once one form is acquired the other is blocked.

A form-function constraint also appears to be the reason why learners avoid the production of existential sentences with *there is/are*. This presumably happens because the dummy pronoun *there* is already being used as a demonstrative pronoun.

In just the same way, learners avoid the spontaneous production of forms of *do* as an auxiliary since this form is already in use as an important lexical verb.

Another striking example of a form-function constraint involves the very general preference that learners exhibit in using *must* rather than *have to* as a modal of obligation. In the *SAMPLE* study this preference was quite striking, with all but two of the twenty-four learners interviewed producing *must* (forty times in one and a half hours in one case), but only four or five producing *have to*, and then only once or twice; all of these latter informants produced *must* and produced it more frequently as well. This pattern of usage (which is just as evident for learners who have received no formal instruction and cannot therefore be attributed to teaching) is the reverse of that for native speakers, who show a marked preference for *have to* or *have got to* in this capacity. Once again, the "one form, one function" principle can explain this observation. Thus, *must* functions solely as a modal of obligation (or in a closely related way as a modal of strong probability) while *have* is variously a lexical verb, an auxiliary, and with the complementizer *to* attached, a modal.

It is worth remembering that while *have* is one of the few modals to take a complementizer in standard English,

learners quite often attach *to* to other common modals, including *must*, and may not be aware of the general rule that modals do not take complementizers, and consequently see nothing distinctive about *have to*.

Form-function constraints appear to persist well beyond the stage when learners no longer adhere to the general principle of "one form, one function", and have very serious consequences for teaching, where they are frequently violated. Thus, it is general practice to present both contracted and uncontracted forms together (on the assumption that one will explain the other), and to emphasise the various usages of multi-purpose words like *do* and *there*.

Form-function constraints have proved quite resistant to explicit attempts to overcome them by drill in the classroom, and it therefore appears that they must be allowed to disappear of their own accord, even if this process takes an inordinate amount of time[4]. In the context of teaching, the form-function principle and form-function constraints imply that items and structures are more likely to be learnt, especially by beginning learners, if presented as having a distinctive, singular function: communicatively unnecessary duplications should be avoided, regardless of how characteristic they may be of the speech patterns of native speakers. We have already discussed the problems posed by the presentation of sets of items: form-function constraints exacerbate these problems.

2.2.2. Lexical Opposites

We have talked about multi-member sets above. Lexical opposites are sets of just two items, such as *good/bad* or *thick/thin*. Learners also appear strongly predisposed to

avoid learning or producing both members of such pairs. For instance, in the case of *good/bad*, learners at about 1.0 to 2.0 on the AMES scale produce nearly one hundred examples of *good*, but less than ten examples of *bad*. It therefore appears that teachers should avoid presenting such pairs together, which, unfortunately, tends to be the standard practice, and is an almost surefire recipe for confusing students. Given that lexical opposites can be produced by negation — that is, *bad* can be implied by negating *good*, the case of lexical opposites may be merely a further example of a form-function constraint, or it may be a more specific result of a late distinction in lexical retrieval processes themselves. Whatever the explanation for the confusion of lexical opposites by learners (and even, in the case of words like *left* and *right*, by many native speakers), the teaching of such pairs should be avoided. This claim is, of course, already implicit in our discussion of the results of form-function constraints, where it is suggested that redundant or duplicate forms be avoided.

2.3. Learning as Decomposition

To return to our discussion of the processes of learning themselves, another form of learning by analysis, but heading in the opposite direction, involves the decomposition of elements — as opposed to their elaboration. That is, as the learner's grammar accumulates rules and becomes more complex and target-like the functions of the individual parts which make it up become clearer and more specific. The emergence of the auxiliary *do* provides an example of this process.

Thus, the point of entry for *do* into learner grammars seems to be almost inevitably through the utterance *don('t) know*. This utterance is produced by all learners at

a very early stage and is clearly formulaic. It is also worth noting that the semantics of *don('t) know* are non-standard, in that the phrase is used to indicate incapacity in general rather than just ignorance[5]. At the stage when *don('t) know* is incorporated into the learner's repertoire, the canonical method of verbal negation is with the negative particle *no(t)*.

After a period of latency, *don('t)* gradually begins to appear in other phrases besides *don('t) know*. Certain verbs, possibly for reasons of input frequency, appear to be congenial environments for the appearance of *don't*. These are *like, understand, have, want, think* and *remember*. At this stage *don('t)* could be classified as an alternative preverbal negator to *no(t)*. Some learners also produce *don('t)* in postverbal positions for a brief period.

This situation in which *no(t)* and *don('t)* contend for the preverbal negator slot appears to persist for quite some time, with *no(t)* gradually being phased out. Even when *don('t)* has effectively supplanted *no(t)* as the standard preverbal negator, there is little evidence that it is anything other than a "monomorphemic" chunk.

The analysis of *don('t)* into *do* and *not* itself appears to be a very gradual process. Factors which appear to facilitate this process are the use of *do* in questions, the acquisition of other *-n't* negators, such as *can't* and *haven('t)*, and possibly an increasingly clearer perception of the phonological shape of *don't*.

This process is significant for a number of reasons, some of which have already been discussed. One principle is that forms can enter a system before the functions that they ultimately come to index — this we have observed previously. *Don't* enters the system as a semantically vacuous item. In the rough-house of linguistic usage, it is

gradually shaken free from its formulaic matrix and passed through successive functional reinterpretations.

The case of *don('t)* shows that formulaic language can serve as what we might call the "seedbed" of propositional language. While it may still be necessary to use terms like "formula" in some kinds of linguistic discussion, the way in which a chunk like *don't* is reanalysed by application of the rules for its production in a widening range of verbal environments makes it clear that the progression from formulaic language to productive language involves no hard and fast distinctions, with "function-words" like *don('t)* becoming, as we have seen, increasingly more functional and independent as they are used to modify a lengthening and usually predictable list of lexical items[6].

2.4. Learning as Analysis: Implications

We have seen how learners set up prototype categories to enable semantically different items to be classified as syntactically similar: this results in continua of the type represented by active verbs at one end and strictly stative verbs at the other. In a similar fashion formulaic language evolves gradually into productive language. This "continuum quality" is a characteristic of language and, in fact, one of the properties of language which ultimately leads to its being learnable, since learners can proceed by a process of "family resemblances", organising their grammatical systems through a series of local comparisons: in other words, learners do not need to have a global view of what they are doing, since they can proceed by a series of small, related steps. Moreover, this property of language makes it learnable in a particular fixed fashion, as the progression through environments for *don't* shows. Once again, this principle of organisation is seldom, if ever, exploited in teaching.

Notes to Chapter 2

1 If the second person form is not a pronoun, it is likely to be a name, or, in the case of child first language learners, a pair of words like mama and dada, which respectively refer to the child's mother, and father, and (very often) all other adults, regardless of their sex.

2 Johnston, 1985a, Chapter 4, Section 12, and Chapter 5.

3 See Pienemann, 1984, for a thorough discussion of actual linguistic consequences. See Johnston, 1985a, Chapter 5, for a more general discussion.

4 Brindley, G. (personal communication) tried to teach existential "there's" to a group of relatively low level learners over a ten week period, with an almost total lack of success. The author repeated this experiment himself in 1987, with equally poor results.

5 Johnston, 1985a, Chapter 4, Section 5, and Chapter 5.

6 What I have been calling "function words" are more properly characterized as "closed class" items (since they are members of small, fixed sets). For closed class words, therefore, the process of "de-formularization" involves the gradual formation and closing off of the classes to which they belong.

Chapter 3

Developmental Sequences

While the processes described above are significant, especially in view of the way they are ignored and contradicted in most teaching practice, the most important finding of second language acquisition research is undoubtedly what has been hinted at in the discussion above: the existence of stages of development. Since there is very little space in this essay to describe or explain the findings relating to these stages, the reader is referred directly to Johnston (1985a,b), particularly the second, shorter paper, which deals with the whole question of development in some detail and puts the findings of the *SAMPLE* Report in the context of subsequent work conducted jointly by this author and Manfred Pienemann.

In Johnston (1985b) and Pienemann and Johnston (1984;1985) we show how stages of development can be described abstractly in terms of universal constraints on psychological speech processing mechanisms. This means of defining development allows a wide range of apparently unrelated structures to be described and interrelated in such a way that predictions about the state of a learner's interlanguage can be made on the basis of small amounts of data. Furthermore, we outline an assessment procedure which puts this capacity for prediction into the hands of the classroom teacher. In Pienemann and Johnston (1987) we show how earlier attempts to define development in terms of increasing accuracy, or in general terms of "proficiency" are necessarily invalid and/or subjective.

The main point that needs to be made about developmental sequences and stages of development is that this concept only applies to a *restricted range* of structures. This finding forms the basis for a model of language acquisition in which certain features are arrayed along a developmental axis while others exhibit a degree of free variation which is not commensurate with the notion of development, but which does reflect how individual learners balance the demands of correctness against those of effective communication. This is termed the "multi-dimensional" model of language acquisition, and in addition to the characteristics described above provides a means of understanding how oral proficiency rating procedures relate to a learner's language production and, tentatively, of how phenomena such as "fossilisation" or "stabilisation" occur. This model also provides the teacher with a way of relating the concept of "correctness" or "accuracy" to particular features in a learner's speech.

3.1. The Teachability Hypothesis

In terms of implications for the classroom, perhaps the most important feature of the model is a testable (and extensively tested) set of implications. These implications form what Manfred Pienemann terms the "Teachability Hypothesis".[1]

The Teachability Hypothesis makes quite distinct claims about the learning (and, by implication, teaching) of developmental and variational features — the two types of language features identified by the multi-dimensional model.

3.1.1. Teachability and Developmental Features

Developmental features, according to the hypothesis, can only be learnt in strict order. This is because each developmental stage a learner passes through is characterised by speech processing operations of a particular complexity, with successive stages building on the psychological operations learned at previous stages. Another way of putting this is to say that a given stage of development is characterised by a set of prerequisites which have to be mastered before a learner is "ready" to pass on to the next stage. These prerequisites are based on universal cognitive operations involving memory load, the ability to distinguish between various types of categories, and the ability to manipulate strings of elements. Since the cognitive operations which constitute the prerequisites for stages of development are universal, they apply equally to all learners, and are not affected by external factors, such as the learner's first language or the learning setting itself.

Given the nature and organisation of developmental stages, the Teachability Hypothesis completely rules out the possibility that a learner might somehow "beat" the permitted order of acquisition of developmental features for a given language. The Teachability Hypothesis makes quite specific claims as to what this order will be and has been tested in a series of experiments. These teachability experiments were initially conducted with learners of German as a second language. (Pienemann, 1984). Learners who participated ranged from immigrant children in Germany acquiring their language in a largely natural setting to university students in Australia and the United States learning German in a largely or purely formal setting.[2]

The Teachability Hypothesis has been tested for English, in the course of trialling the assessment procedure referred to above. In all cases, the results have been the same: structures characteristic of a given developmental stage are only mastered by learners who are already at the stage immediately below: learners at lower stages never produce the targeted structures, even if — as is the case with some of the university learners — they "know the rules".

While the claims made by the Teachability Hypothesis have been borne out for a diverse collection of learners — and a wide variety of methods of instruction — there are differences in the ways unsuccessful learners respond to their situation. Some learners simply adapt the structures they cannot master to the constraints imposed on them by their stage of development, and produce them in non-standard form. Others, particularly the university students, develop elaborate but nevertheless developmentally less complex substitutes. Another group, however — comprised largely of very linguistically norm-oriented learners — takes the communicatively backward step of almost entirely avoiding either the production of structures they know to be incorrect or which contain incorrect features to which their attention has been drawn by unsuccessful instruction. (Pienemann, 1987).

The behaviour of this latter group gives rise to an important corollary of the Teachability Hypothesis, namely that *premature instruction can actually be harmful — and not just ineffective.* This corollary, together with the findings that instruction can (if the learner is "ready") accelerate the process of acquisition, increase the number of different contexts in which newly learnt rules are applied, and can also result in the production of untaught structures characteristic of the newly attained developmental stage, accentuates the importance of the Teachability Hypothesis.

3.1.2. Teachability and Variational Features

The Teachability Hypothesis has distinct consequences for the two types of linguistic features identified by the multi-dimensional model. Developmental features are subject to strict constraints on learnability and, in consequence, teachability. Variational features, on the other hand, are computationally simple and can usually be produced, in principle, by the second developmental stage. What gives them their variable character is that while learners can produce them consistently, they frequently fail to do so. One powerful reason for this is that variational features tend to be unnecessary to effective communication (the verb *to be* is a good example of a variational feature). While all learners tend to simplify in the interests of effective or easy communication from time to time, learners with a particular psychological makeup and sociological profile show a marked tendency towards simplification of this sort in nearly all speech situations. The result is a consistently non-standard pattern of speech of the kind that teachers frequently call "fractured", or — in cases of longstanding residence — "fossilised".

The lack of complex psychological constraints on the production of variational features has a positive implication for teaching. Being more manipulable than developmental features, variational features are much more amenable to the influence of instruction.

This finding emerged very clearly from the first of the teachability experiments mentioned above (the one in which immigrant children learning German were involved). In this experiment, instruction of the German equivalent of *to be* was chosen as a counterbalance to the developmental teaching objectives, and the finding which emerged was that all the children responded quite positively — in some cases dramatically so — to the

instruction, with the rate of omission for this item dropping by over 50% in some cases after a week of specifically targeted teaching of various kinds.

It is only fair to mention, however, that a chance interview with one of the children a few months later revealed that, at least in her case, the improvement did not last. (Pienemann, 1984, and Pienemann, 1987). This suggests that teaching alone cannot permanently alter a student's attitude to correctness, unless supported by a significant change in the learner's social conditions and attitude. Nevertheless, well directed instruction can result in the production of a less simplified speech pattern, which may in turn provide the learner with opportunities to alter other aspects of his or her life situation.

3.1.3. The Teachability Hypothesis - Summary

The Teachability Hypothesis, in providing a concrete definition of "readiness" and in distinguishing between the effects of instruction on developmental and variational features, allows the teacher to make rational and effective decisions about what structures to teach and how to avoid ineffective and possibly damaging structural teaching objectives. It should be noted very carefully that it *does not* imply in any way the use of an explicitly structural teaching method. All methods of language teaching that actually teach language require the teacher to make choices about what structures to present and what errors to correct. The Teachability Hypothesis merely lays down certain guidelines for making these choices. It is imperative to understand the nature of the Teachability Hypothesis. Its restricted domain of application does not mean that it can be dismissed as peripheral and unimportant. While there are many issues in language teaching to which the hypothesis does not address itself

and for which it has no solutions, the Teachability Hypothesis does have some very definite implications. Moreover, these implications are based on empirical findings and not, as is so often the case in matters of language teaching practice, on mere unsupported opinions or received ideas.

The process of syllabus construction is a complex one, and involves many other considerations besides those relating to structural objectives. As we will see in the following section even the implementation of these latter objectives is not as straightforward as it might first appear. In this context, therefore, the preceding discussion of the Teachability Hypothesis may appear to have made a mountain out of a molehill. If it does, it might be worth bearing in mind the conclusions arrived at in Pienemann and Johnston (1987).

Pienemann and Johnston's paper contains an extensive review of the many different factors which have been thought to play a part in language development. Most teaching methods are founded on assumptions about such factors — for instance, the role of motivation, or attitude, or contact, in fostering language learning — and try to shape the learning process and its environment in such a way as to produce or maximise the influence of those factors which are thought to be most conducive to successful learning. For example, needs based approaches are founded on the assumption that motivation is an influential external variable, and the motivated learner is a better learner; likewise, communicative approaches assume that a particular kind of motivation — instrumental motivation (or motivation to use language for certain utilitarian ends) — is a decisive factor in the learning process. In our survey of such factors, however, we were unable to isolate a single external factor of this kind for which there was unimpeachably positive evidence in the very considerable body of research we examined. In fact,

the more research we looked at, the more contradictory our notes became.

Finally, we were forced to conclude that there was an almost equal amount of evidence and counter evidence for every sociological, behavioural or biological factor we listed. In the midst of all this confusion, it was "internal" factors of the kind which constitute the Teachability Hypothesis, which were best supported and least contradicted by the available admissible evidence.

A number of points emerge from the discussion above. First, given the lack of hard evidence on which to base an optimal teaching method and learning environment, and the existence of a growing body of research in support of the Teachability Hypothesis, it would be unreasonable and even irresponsible to neglect the implications for teaching that this hypothesis has.

Second, regardless of how commonsensical they might seem, none of the assumptions behind any widely practised teaching "method" are supported very strongly by empirical research. This does not mean that the methods are wrong or ineffective. Indeed, in some cases, it is clear that the research which might have provided support for a particular approach was badly designed and conducted, and consequently incapable of producing decisive findings. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that all teaching methods are currently the products of intuition and are not well founded in terms of what we know about learning — at least for the present.

It has already been made clear that the Teachability Hypothesis cannot by itself form the basis of a teaching method or a means of syllabus construction, or any other aspect of language pedagogy. The existence of developmental stages, for instance, does not mean that learners should be streamed according to their stage of

development: streaming depends on overall course objectives and many other educational and even administrative considerations.

This leads us to the final objective of this essay, namely, to examine the implications that findings from second language acquisition research have for the activities of the classroom, and to the question of how such findings can be implemented.

Notes to Chapter 3

1 Pienemann, 1987. The term originated in Pienemann, 1985.

2 See Pienemann, 1985, Pienemann, 1987, Daniel, 1983, Westmoreland, 1983.

Chapter 4

Implementing Research

The above discussion was not meant to be a display of academic sophistry. Rather, it is meant to illustrate the central thesis of this section of this paper. This is that what teaching needs — and currently lacks — is a *sound body of practical knowledge* which can only be developed through *experimentation in the classroom.* It is here that the activities and attitudes of teachers are a vital ingredient in any recipe for success, since it will be teachers with an understanding of the processes of second language acquisition who will ultimately be in charge of conducting these experiments and implementing the knowledge thus gained. In short, no such body of knowledge can come into being without support and sympathy from the classroom.

The problem of implementing research into classroom practice can be illustrated by examining the implications of the findings about developmental stages we have just outlined above.

Consider the following situation. Assuming the existence of stages of development, a logical step for syllabus design might seem to be writing these stages directly into a new syllabus. On the other hand, if learners pass through developmental stages in a fixed sequence, then it might seem equally logical to disregard the question of how the syllabus is written — at least as regards structure — since

learners will organise this aspect of their learning themselves.

On reflection, this is a very peculiar situation: on the basis of the one set of findings we have two diametrically opposed proposals for teaching. Both of these proposals have actually been made[1], so the example is not hypothetical. This seemingly paradoxical situation illustrates an important point about the application of SLA research, or indeed any other kind of research, to practical tasks. This is that research findings are, as often as not, neutral as to their positive implications for practice, assuming, that is, that a positive implication is more than a message to discontinue some practice because it is useless or counter-productive.

It is important to bear in mind the point just made, since it has frequently been ignored in the past and has led to many premature conclusions about teaching and teaching "methods". This tendency to jump to conclusions on the part of materials designers and so-called "applied linguists" is one of the reasons for the faddish nature of language teaching, with its endless succession of "new approaches", each one consigning its predecessors to obsolescence and oblivion.

Let's return to the question of the two proposals, however. Which one, if either, is right? If this question is directed to the SLA researcher, the only honest answer that he or she can give is "I don't know". That is, on the basis of SLA research alone, there is no way to resolve the problem. The fact of the matter is that in order to come to some definite conclusions about whether to ignore structure or not we need more information. The kind of information we need is information about whether, say, the presentation of structures in the order that they are learned and to learners who are capable of mastering them accelerates the learning process or increases the range of

structures used, or the rate of accuracy with which they are produced. Conversely, we might also want to know whether a lack of attention to structure — which will almost certainly result in the presentation of unlearnable material — can have any detrimental effects on the learner.

This extra information is not likely to come from SLA research. Rather, it will have to be provided by carefully trying out the different proposals *in the classroom itself.* In other words, the information will come from *teaching* — or at least "teaching experiments".

In short, research can provide guidelines and suggestions and also concrete proposals, but these have to be put to the test. Of course, there is no reason why SLA researchers should not be involved in such experiments, but equally, there is no reason why they should — it is not part of their normal job description. I make this latter point because currently there is a widespread assumption that researchers ought to be able to answer questions about the implications of their work for teaching, and when they fail to live up to expectations by not doing so, or by hedging, this is taken as an admission that they live in ivory towers and so far have nothing of any consequence to offer the practising teacher. To be fair, this assumption is also a very natural response on the part of teachers to being told not to do something by people who then can't tell them what to do instead.

Teaching experiments relating to question of the significance of developmental stages to syllabus construction have actually been conducted by SLA researchers. These experiments are, of course, just those we have referred to in outlining the Teachability Hypothesis. On the basis of the results of these experiments — namely, that appropriately targeted instruction can be very effective while inappropriately

directed teaching can be detrimental — we are now in a better position to decide between the two proposals. Quite clearly, the "ignore structure" proposal must be ruled out. This does not mean — as the discussion of the Teachability Hypothesis should have made evident — that we just concoct a structured syllabus by somehow writing up findings about stages of development in textbook form.

Besides those we have already discussed, there are numerous other reasons preventing research findings from being translated directly into a syllabus. Many of these reasons derive from the fact that the language classroom differs as a learning setting from those settings which provided the data for researchers to work on. This is true even if the research comes from studies of formal learning, since there are many different formal settings.

One example of a problem of syllabus construction that follows from the considerations above is whether, in implementing a structured syllabus, we should make a distinction between the language that constitutes the general "input" to the student and the language that is the object of pedagogical focus — that is, the language that forms part of the structural teaching objectives of the syllabus, or that the teacher chooses to emphasise by activities such as correction. Language in pedagogical focus, we know from teachability experiments, is subject to certain constraints. But what about the language produced by the teacher in the course of asking and answering questions and generally running the activities of the classroom? Should this, too, conform to what a given student is able to process?

If the answer to this question were "Yes", then the teacher would be frequently obliged to produce non-standard, simplified language, on the grounds that such language would be more intelligible to the learner and lead to a smoother running classroom. Of course, this is a demand

that many teachers would not find very acceptable, and it might well have to be abandoned on these grounds alone. Also, one could argue that since learners will simplify any input that is developmentally too complex for them, there is no need for the teacher to "preprocess" general classroom input in this way. On the other hand, one could also argue — despite these very powerful objections — that addressing learners in standard speech might be bad policy, since those features of standard structures which could not be processed by learners on the basis of their simplified "grammar of expectancy" would introduce what amounted to "noise" into the channel of communication.

Once again, there is no real way of arbitrating between these two points of view without putting them to the test. And even then, one would need to bear in mind that the results of such tests might vary for different teaching situations and learner populations. For instance, most teachers tend to use simplified communication strategies to some degree, as interaction studies have borne out[2], and almost all teachers will resort to simplified language in such situations as dealing with potential enrollees, or directing an errant student to the right classroom. In short, each step in the process of syllabus construction needs to be carefully considered in the light of a host of relevant factors. Moreover, at certain junctures, conflicting proposals have to be put to the test: there simply is no "one way".

4.1. Theory and Practice

I talked above about the development and accumulation of a body of practical knowledge for the classroom. Supposedly, this body of knowledge is what self-styled "applied linguists" and "methodologists" are meant to be providing. Sadly, this is not the case. As a number of

people are now beginning to point out[3], while our knowledge of the processes of SLA is growing steadily, we still know next to nothing about the processes of formal learning. "Methodologists" who claim otherwise are, to put it bluntly, talking through their hats: such people — and they are legion — are not generating theory (which can be tested), but ideology (which cannot).

In this connection, it is worth remembering the point made in Section 3.1.3 — namely, that no extant method of teaching is based on properly tested assumptions about the conditions which favour learning, and that some commonly held beliefs about learning processes, such as those to do with habit formation, are demonstrably inadequate and obsolete.

The "missing link" between research and language teaching, then, is the well founded body of practice we have been talking of. There has been a certain amount of discussion recently about the need for a "theory of teaching", given that "applied linguistics" seems to have failed to narrow the gap between linguistics proper and language teaching. In the context of the present discussion, "theory of teaching" may not be the right label to apply to this missing component, since it fails to emphasise the practical character of what is needed. At the risk of seeming excessively hard-nosed, I would say the best way to describe this missing body of knowledge is as a *technology of teaching*.

Let's briefly consider the notion of a technology, as it helps to clarify a number of important issues about the practical implementation of research findings.

One important aspect of any technology is its independence from the research activities that provide its basis. A technology develops in response to particular needs and utilises the information provided by "pure"

research activities as it sees fit. If the technology is well developed, it is unlikely to reflect too closely the concerns of any one type of research: we do not think of engineering, for example, as "applied physics". Engineering certainly depends on physics, but it has its own problem space, and is comprised of many diverse activities.

Language teaching, on the other hand, is not characterised by this kind of independence. Presently, it tends to be almost synonymous with "applied linguistics". This is a reflection of the upsurge in linguistics in the sixties and seventies. In the past, language teaching has leaned very heavily on other disciplines, such as psychology, when it too had it heyday in the fifties. In the case of language teaching there are a number of research disciplines whose findings may be of relevance, such as sociology, psychology, various branches of linguistics, ethology, and so on. Yet language teaching has never really defined its own problem space and has tended to be at the mercy of whichever of the social sciences is experiencing a period of ascendancy.

This kind of dependence has led to many unnecessary problems, since the concerns of pure research have not been properly separated from the concerns of language teaching itself. Thus, in general, there is no reason for practitioners to become overly concerned about theoretical problems and disputes at the frontiers of research. Although theoretical physics is currently in a state of deep confusion, the past two or three decades have witnessed a revolution in electrical engineering which many commentators consider to be in the order of a second industrial revolution.

Yet when we look at the relationship between teaching and SLA research, we find that the same situation has resulted in a classic "Mexican standoff": teachers feel loath

to act while theorists disagree, and theorists themselves (apart from an opportunistic minority) behave towards practitioners in an excessively cautious fashion because their responsibilities are not clearly demarcated. A "technology" of teaching would put an end to this unhealthy co-dependence: teachers would cease to be unnecessarily constrained by the problems of theory, and researchers would cease to be hamstrung by problems of practice they are frequently unqualified to deal with.

In summary, while the establishment of a sound body of knowledge about the formal processes of language learning, will — particularly in its initial stages — demand a close collaboration between researchers and practitioners, the problems of teaching will have to be formulated and solved within the context of teaching itself. Failing this, teaching will remain a kind of intellectual Bolivia, with a history of "revolutions" and very little real change or progress to show for them.

4.2. From Theory to Practice

For the purpose of illustrating the relationship between a "free-standing" technology and a fundamental research activity I have used the links between engineering and physics as a primary analogy. However, the relationship of SLA research to teaching — and the situation of teaching and teachers in general — can perhaps best be summed up by a somewhat more humanistic metaphor. This is the analogy of medical practice.

Current language teaching is in a state not unlike that of medicine some hundred-odd years ago. As a general description this may seem unflattering. In what it implies about the role of practitioners in helping to bring about change, however, it is not unconstructive. Consider the following parallels.

a) Like doctors in the era before asepsis, anaesthetics, antibiotics, systematic diagnosis and well documented surgical procedures, teachers are really working in the dark and cannot judge their own effectiveness. Just as a certain \percentage of the sick will recover spontaneously, a certain percentage of people are capable of learning languages very effectively without tuition: in the absence of empirical knowledge about the effect of teaching modern day teachers can no more take credit for successes in the classroom than pre-modern doctors were able to take credit for cures whose mechanisms they did not understand. Nobody, of course, wants to take credit for the failures, but given a proper theoretical foundation to work with, these can be instructive also.

b) While the doctors of old applied leeches and talked of humours and bile, curiosity motivated a small group of people to experiment with chemicals, perform dissections, and examine broths and tissues under microscopes. This latter group was at best considered eccentric, and at worst diabolical, and their activities must have seemed supremely devoid of practical value — to the populace at large, to the doctors, and even sometimes to the experimenters themselves.

SLA researchers and their ilk provide the modern parallel: in the context of the day to day teaching situation of most teachers, where administrative problems, traumatised students, and inadequate resources are the norm, their work can seem arcane and even frivolous. Even so, we should remember it was the broth-gazers and dissectionists who provided the scientific knowledge on which medicine as we now know it is based. Of course, in order for this to happen, some members of the medical profession would have had to look sympathetically on the researchers' endeavours, and utilise the knowledge generated. In just

the same way, if the work of SLA researchers and others is to bear practical fruit, it will be language teachers who nurture and develop it.

c) The medical developments that we have talked about did not occur overnight. Even with some spectacular successes — such as vaccines against smallpox and rabies, and anaesthesia — progress was slow. More than a few exponents of change had their careers ruined by pigheaded resistance to basic practices like asepsis.

When we turn to language teaching the picture actually looks somewhat brighter. On the research side, a lot has happened. This is partly a reflection of the times — more than ninety percent of all scientists who ever lived are alive right now — and partly the result of cumulative advances in research technology: we know a lot more about how to do research than we did in past centuries. Today we have computers and other devices to facilitate our activities. So the outlook is not too gloomy, and it is not unreasonable to expect that the language teaching of the near future will be rather different from the hit and miss methods of today.

d) The most important resource in teaching is the human one. Again, the medical analogy can give us a reference point: in the main, present day language teachers do not have adequate professional training. This is not the fault of the individuals concerned, since training facilities are only just coming into existence. But consider your local GP: although not expert in any of the many branches of medicine, he or she has at least a grounding in a range of disciplines — anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, immunology, and so on.

Language teachers, on the other hand, frequently lack any comparable basic grounding: many know next to nothing about linguistics, or psychology, much less the specialised branches of these disciplines like SLA research or learning theory. This situation is further complicated by the fact that, by default, teachers take for granted a mishmash of obsolete and discredited theories, such as behaviouristic learning theory and traditional grammar. (If you think this is unfair to teachers, reflect on how you would feel if your GP didn't know the difference between a vein and an artery and considered that pneumonia could be cured by mustard compresses). There is no reason why this situation should persist for too much longer. Institutional solutions are at hand; TESOL courses are now being set up in many tertiary facilities and will become basic requirements for anyone wishing to practise as an ESL teacher. For the individual, too, there is always the possibility of doing such courses to upgrade one's qualifications.

e) To avert any possible misunderstandings, I would like to make it clear that this discussion has focussed on the application of theory to practice and to reiterate that — as in medicine — in teaching there are qualities of personality and commitment which without doubt have a very considerable bearing on a practitioner's effectiveness. That these are qualities which cannot be adequately described or quantified by no means diminishes their importance. Nevertheless, commitment is served by knowledge, and cannot itself serve as a substitute for ignorance.

1 See Pienemann, 1985, for discussion of these proposals. See also Krashen & Terrell, 1983, and Dulay & Burt, 1973, for the original proposals.

2 Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991. See Chapter 5 for extensive discussion of native speaker non-native speaker interactions.

3 See Pienemann, 1985, Pienemann, 1987, Moore, 1984, Johnston, 1985b, and Johnston, 1985c.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

This monograph makes a strong case for the restructuring of some quite fundamental aspects of teaching practice on the basis of findings from second language acquisition research, and it does so without apology. One of the prerequisites for the changes advocated here is the development of a self-contained body of teaching praxis akin to the "technologies" of engineering or medicine. Given that the present writing is a revised version of an article which appeared almost a decade ago and given that it is, if anything, more relevant now than it was then, it is worthwhile to step back and — with the benefit of hindsight — consider how, in the interim, the task of assimilating theory into practice has fared.

The sad truth is that, while some progress has been made, it has been meagre, a few notable exceptions notwithstanding. Despite the establishment of SLA and ESL courses in various types of tertiary institution, a general inertia still prevails in the classroom. Meanwhile, findings from fundamental research continue to accumulate. The net result is that the gap between theory and practice has gotten wider. I believe that what has transpired illustrates just how important the existence of an empirically-founded body of teaching practice is to any implementation of theory into practice. I will provide a brief account of events as I see them to back this up.

1. For language teaching practitioners, the initial impact of many findings from SLA came as somewhat of a shock. This shock produced two typical reactions, both understandable and characteristic of such a situation, but — and I say this with the benefit of hindsight — neither of which was really propitious in the long term.

One reaction was predictably negative: the implications that flowed most directly from SLA research tended to highlight unproductive or even counterproductive aspects of teaching practice, and very definitely overwhelmed their laudatory counterparts. For some of those whose response was negative, the ongoing attitude has been one of denial; they have turned their backs. For others, the public relations problem created by empirical SLA research has led to their willing exploitation by "language ideologues", like Stephen Krashen, with appealing "theories" conjured up out of thin air to offer the teaching profession the reassuringly soft option that its instincts are good and that it is doing the right thing. (I have actually heard one proponent of the views of Krashen and the "Natural Method" which follows from them, assert at a professional conference that the *i* in the *i+1 theory* of "Comprehensible Input" is so intuitive that it is "mystical" — which is, of course, just fine if you are a with-it teacher)[1]. This is all very well for those who just don't want to know or don't wish to acknowledge the difference between science-fiction and reality. However, as practitioners who want to act professionally, and are willing to scrutinise our activities and engage in productive debate, I believe we need to ask ourselves, as dispassionately as possible: "Did we expect a large body of research to do nothing more than confirm the status quo, and not turn up anything that suggested changes were in order?". I say this because it is the normal situation for serious research to reveal that things are not as they were thought to have been: after all, exploration and research showed that the earth was neither flat nor the centre of

the solar system, and at the time these findings met, to say the least, with less than universal acclaim.

The second response I alluded to was the converse of negativity: unalloyed enthusiasm. And while it was encouragingly positive for all concerned, it very often turned out to be short-lived. It is important to understand why this was so. Enthusiastic acceptance occurred in the context of the technological vacuum I have described above. Because teaching practice was basically a collection of unacknowledged beliefs and received ideas, it had no real self-identity or concept of internal sovereignty. As a result, it succumbed to wave after wave of would-be colonisers. Some of these colonisers were proponents of academic disciplines like psychology and although they had a message to sell, or thought they had, their real interests and goals lay elsewhere; many other colonists were simply fortune-hunters or mercenaries, such as the exponents of bizarre methods like "Suggestopaedia". Language teaching bore the brunt of their incursions like some third world country whose colonial masters came and went as the result of political changes in a far-distant continent of which they knew next to nothing. With no real directions of its own, language teaching suffered a succession of fads and fashions that left it jaded, suspicious, and thoroughly disoriented. In this context, SLA research was just one more passing bandwagon.

Worse still, many SLA researchers (rightly) attached labels to their products warning potential users to "apply with caution". Confronted with the complexities of defining their own area of professional competence, and applying an increasingly complex and sometimes contradictory body of theory to the resolution of problems within this area, while simultaneously carrying out their already taxing jobs, most teachers gave up their efforts and wrote off the experience as one more false hope.

2. It is here that we come to the second component of this unfortunate situation. This is that language planners at their various levels have almost uniformly failed to provide the kind of infrastructure that would enable the complex problems of teaching practice to be investigated and resolved in the classroom. The last decade has witnessed a burgeoning in the field of "classroom research", a positive and laudable development. The problem is that this research has been carried out almost exclusively by researchers from universities. The more "applied" applied linguistics may become, and the more closely the interests of some applied linguists approximate to those of language teachers, the better for the latter. But the gap itself between theory and practice will remain until there is wholesale reaching out for what is being offered. "Wholesale" is the operative word here, since individual efforts require institutional support for major changes to result.

If a body of teaching praxis is to be developed, then administrators will have to make provision for the teachers in their charge to be given the time and resources to do so. That is, there will have to be extensive provisions for secondment, support for teachers who wish to "bring themselves up to speed" with theoretical issues relevant to their interests and who may need to do courses or liaise regularly with the producers of fundamental research, general inducements for teachers to upgrade their qualifications: in short the creation of a culture which is conducive to serious experiment and change in the workplace itself.

None of this is what the increasingly "time and motion" educational bureaucracies, with their escalating demand for measures of productivity and other "magic numbers", encourage. By and large, research does not profit from the

managerial style of bureaucracies — their unremitting demands for "results" (whatever they may be, and however they might be measured), tend to create more progress reports than progress. Educational bureaucracies are currently some of the worst offenders in this regard. Where support is now most needed it is largely absent.

At the applied end of linguistics, we have thrusts towards classroom research. At the theoretical end, we have theories which — because they have become more constrained and precise — lend themselves to small, manageable projects.

Amongst teachers, for all the avalanches of novelties they have had to endure, there is now a greater degree of knowledge and interest. These positive entries in the ledger will count for very little, however, if policy-makers and managers continue to become less responsive to this environment and less adaptive to its long-term demands; they will need to realise that they are going the way of the dinosaur — a tall order, since the capacity for change appears to have been in short supply amongst those particular behemoths.

Epilogue

To maintain the historical perspective I have adopted in this concluding section, and to keep the record straight, I will note that my final remarks in 1986 were somewhat more optimistic than those of today, and that I restricted myself to listing some of the more recent interesting literature, with particular emphasis on local products and projects.

As far as literature goes, there is obviously a lot more now available, including several textbooks — two of which I especially recommend: namely, Lightbown and Spada (1993) and Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991). The first of these, *How Languages Are Learned,* is an excellent introduction to SLA research and is written from a classroom perspective, and the second, *An Introduction To Second Language Acquisition Research,* provides an up-to-date and extremely thorough coverage of the many branches of SLA, and has an excellent bibliography for readers who wish to pursue particular interests. It is a comment on the extent and complexity of SLA in the 1990's that, despite its title, its clarity of style and logical presentation, Larsen-Freeman and Long is a difficult book to read from cover to cover, even for professionals, and is best approached as a reference for particular topics. None of this should be taken as a criticism of the book: SLA is big business, and even an introduction is a map with many highways and byways: all of which is yet another illustration of my general point. Locally, too, a great deal has happened, but that is a story for another day. In any case, you can find about some of it in Larsen-Freeman and Long.

As for my apparent pessimism, I would like to say that I think I have a better chance of promoting change, in a field which has had more than its share of flights of fancy, by being realistic, and by attempting to identify exactly what I consider to be the principal obstacles to progress. The last decade has confirmed more strongly than ever what I have written about the need for an independent, soundly-based body of teaching praxis. Constructing this will obviously be no easy task and there will be many obstacles — theoretical, practical, and human — to hamper and prolong its coming of age. However, with the century drawing to a close, there is now no longer any excuse for prevarication; language teaching is in dire need of a thorough overhaul and the only way it is going to get it is

through concerted, co-operative action by all concerned. It isn't just that the emperor has no clothes: he doesn't even have an empire! Diplomacy is simply out of place: one can dither, or get on with the job, and the first step is clear.

Notes to Chapter 5

1 This was Tracey Terrell during a presentation of his recent experiences with the "Natural Method", at the 1986 TESOL Conference in Miami, Florida. The i in question is "comprehensible input", and the i+1 is input at the next level up. Terrell also blandly referred to the Monitor Model as "SLAT" (Standard Language Acquisition Theory), as if it were the undisputed reference point for language acquisition in general i.e. first language acquisition as well) It is interesting (and disturbing) to compare these inane and vacuous definitions with those of the Teachability Hypothesis.

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